

Message Text

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FM USINT DAMASCUS

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INFO AMEMBASSY ABU DHABI

USINT ALGIERS PRIORITY

AMEMBASSY AMMAN

AMEMBASSY BEIRUT PRIORITY

AMEMBASSY CAIRO PRIORITY

AMCONSUL JERUSALEM

AMEMBASSY JIDDA

AMEMBASSY KHARTOUM

AMEMBASSY KUWAIT

AMEMBASSY LONDON

AMEMBASSY MOGADISCIO

AMEMBASSY MOSCOW

AMEMBASSY NOUAKCHOTT

AMEMBASSY PARIS

AMEMBASSY RABAT

AMEMBASSY ROME

AMEMBASSY SANAA

AMEMBASSY TEHRAN

AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV PRIORITY

AMEMBASSY TUNIS

USMISSION GENEVA

USUN NEW YORK 042

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 0504

CAIRO FOR S/S CONTROL

BEIRUT PASS BAGHDAD

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KUWAIT PASS MUSCAT

GENEVA FOR MEPC DEL

EO 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, SY

SUBJECT: ATMOSPHERICS ON THE EVE OF THE SECRETARY'S FOURTH TRIP
TO DAMASCUS

1. SUMMARY: THE OVERWHELMING MAJORITY OF DAMASCENES ARE CONVINCED THAT SECRETARY KISSINGER'S FOURTH TRIP TO DAMASCUS WILL RESULT IN A SYRIAN/ISRAELI DISENGAGEMENT ON THE GOLAN. DESPITE SOME NEGATIVE SOUNDS COMING FROM BOTH THE GOLAN AS WELL AS THE LOCAL COMMUNIST PARTY, SOME DAMASCENES ARE EVEN CONVINCED THAT AGREEMENT HAS ALREADY BEEN REACHED AND THE SECRETARY IS ONLY COMING TO PUT THE FINAL TOUCHES ON IT. MOST DAMASCENES ALSO AGREE THAT THE UNITED STATES IS IN AN EXCELLENT POSITION TO ACHIEVE A BREAKTHROUGH HERE SIMILAR TO THE ONE ACHIEVED IN EGYPT BUT THEY PREDICT DIRE CONSEQUENCES FOR BOTH THE UNITED STATES AND ASAD'S REGIME SHOULD SECRETARY KISSINGER FAIL. END SUMMARY

2. AS THE SYRIAN GOVERNMENT READIES ITSELF FOR SECRETARY KISSINGER'S FOURTH VISIT TO DAMASCUS, THE EXPECTATIONS OF THE DAMASCENES ARE RUNNING AT A HIGH LEVEL. EVERYONE WE HAVE BEEN SPEAKING TO OVER THE LAST COUPLE OF WEEKS IS CONVINCED THAT SECRETARY KISSINGER WILL BE ABLE TO ACHIEVE A SUCCESSFUL DISENGAGEMENT AGREEMENT AND THAT AS A RESULT SYRIA CAN NOW FINALLY GET ON WITH ITS LONG-OVERDUE DEVELOPMENT AND ECONOMIC PROGRESS. MANY PEOPLE IN FACT BELIEVE THAT THE AGREEMENT HAS ALREADY BEEN ACHIEVED BETWEEN THE SYRIANS AND THE ISRAELIS AND THE SECRETARY IS MERELY COMING TO DAMASCUS IN ORDER TO PUT THE FINAL TOUCHES TO HIS SUCCESS.

3. A RELIABLE SOURCE TOLD ME THAT THE HOPES AND OPTIMISM OF THE CIVILIANS ARE SHARED BY THE ARMY AS WELL. ACCORDING TO THIS SOURCE, MANY ARMY OFFICERS ON LEAVE IN DAMASCUS OVER THE LAST FEW WEEKENDS HAVE OPENLY STATED THEIR OPINION THAT IT IS NOW MERELY A MATTER OF DAYS BEFORE A CEASEFIRE IS ACHIEVED ON THE GOLAN. THESE SAME OFFICERS ALSO EXPRESSED

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FULL SUPPORT FOR PRESIDENT ASAD'S EFFORTS TO ACHIEVE SUCH A DISENGAGEMENT IF IT MEANS ISRAELI WITHDRAWAL FROM THE SASA SALIENT AND A RETURN TO SYRIA OF AT LEAST THE TOWN OF KUNITRA. THE MINISTER OF SUPPLY HAS QUITE FRANKLY TOLD SOME OF HIS FRIENDS THAT A SETTLEMENT ALONG THESE LINES IS MORE THAN THE SYRIANS EXPECTED AND THAT SYRIA CAN WITH SUCH AGREEMENT GO TO GENEVA AND NEGOTIATE EVEN IF IT TAKES TWO YEARS FOR A FINAL SETTLEMENT.

4. THE ONLY NEGATIVE VOICES WE HAVE HEARD COME FROM THE LOCAL COMMUNIST PARTY AND FROM PARTISANS OF THE PALESTINIANS. OVER THE LAST COUPLE OF WEEKS THE PRO-SOVIET BRANCH OF THE LOCAL COMMUNIST PARTY HAS BEEN DISTRIBUTING PAMPHLETS WHICH OPENLY ATTACH SECRETARY KISSINGER AND EXPRESS GRAVE DOUBTS ABOUT HIS INTENTIONS. IN THIS REGARD, MANY DAMASCENES ARE CONCERNED THAT THE SOVIETS MAY HAVE DECIDED TO PLAY A SPOILING ROLE IN ORDER TO DENY THE SECRETARY ANOTHER DRAMATIC SUCCESS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AT THEIR EXPENSE. MEANWHILE, THE VOICES OF THE PALESTINIANS ARE MUCH MORE MUTED IN DAMASCUS BUT ONE DOES HEAR ECHOES OF THEIR OPPOSITION AS REFLECTED IN THE BEIRUT PRESS WHICH HAS A WIDE READERSHIP HERE.

5. MEANWHILE THE SOUND AND FURY ON THE GOLAN CONTINUES. ON APRIL 29 THE SERENE APRIL SKIES OVER PARTS OF DAMASCUS WERE THE SCENES OF DOG FIGHTS BETWEEN ISRAELI AND SYRIAN AIRCRAFT. THIS IS THE CLOSEST THE FIGHTING HAS BEEN TO DAMASCUS SINCE IT BEGAN SOME 50 DAYS AGO. NONETHELESS, MOST PEOPLE STILL BELIEVE THAT THIS SOUND AND FURY IS MERELY THEATRICALS AND THAT IN FACT THEY SIGNIFY NOTHING. THERE IS SOME BITTERNESS IN THIS REGARD IN AS MUCH AS SOME PEOPLE ARE CRITICAL OF THE REGIME FOR HAVING ENGAGED IN THESE POLITICALLY-INSPIRED HISTORICALS AT A TIME WHEN THEY BELIEVE IT IS OBVIOUS THAT A PEACE SETTLEMENT IS GOING TO BE ACHIEVED. THESE PERSONS DECRY THE NEEDLESS LOSS OF LIFE AND LIMB.

6. LOCAL RUMOR MILL HAS ALSO PICKED UP EXPRESSIONS OF OPTIMISM FROM THE EGYPTIAN EMBASSY, PARTICULARLY SINCE THE RECENT VISIT OF DEFENSE MINISTER ISMAIL ALI. THE EGYPTIAN AMBASSADOR HIMSELF IS BEING QUOTED AS SAYING
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IT IS ONLY A MATTER OF TIME BEFORE DISENGAGEMENT IS ACHIEVED ON THE GOLAN.

7. ALL IN ALL, THE ATMOSPHERE IN DAMASCUS IS ONE OF GENERAL OPTIMISM. SOME LOCAL OBSERVERS ARE POINTING OUT THAT THE UNITED STATES IN GENERAL AND SECRETARY KISSINGER IN PARTICULAR ARE IN A GREAT POSITION NOW TO ACHIEVE A MAJOR BREAKTHROUGH IN SYRIA SIMILAR TO THAT ACHIEVED IN EGYPT. THEY NOTE, HOWEVER, THAT IF THE SECRETARY FAILS ANTI-AMERICAN REACTION WILL BE INTENSE. IN ADDITION SOME ARE ALSO PREDICTING ANOTHER FULL-SCALE WAR. MOREOVER, THEY SAY THAT ASAD'S REGIME WOULD BE IN DANGER FROM THE EXTREMISTS WHO THUSFAR HAVE BEEN LYING LOW BECAUSE ALL THE SIGNS FOR THE AMERICANS HAVE BEEN SO POSITIVE AND BECAUSE THE GENERAL POPULATION IS SO OPENLY IN FAVOR OF PEACE.

8. AS I HAVE MENTIONED SEVERAL TIMES IN THE PAST, THERE HAS BEEN MUCH RAIN THIS YEAR WHICH IN A SEMI-ARID LAND LIKE SYRIA IS ALWAYS WELCOME. MANY PEOPLE HAVE BEEN CALLING IT "KISSINGER WEATHER" BECAUSE IT BODES WELL FOR THE FUTURE AND, INDEED, EVERY SIGN NOW POINTS TO A GOOD CROP YEAR FOR SYRIA. MOST DAMASCENES ARE ALSO NOW HOPING THAT KISSINGER WILL BRING PEACE TO THE AREA IN THE SAME WAY THAT THEY SAY HE BROUGHT THE RAIN.
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